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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [KCRM](#) [KJUS](#) [ETRD](#) [PM](#)
SUBJECT: PANAMA: WANTED FELON/TERRORIST CLOSER TO SECURING
NATIONAL ASSEMBLY PRESIDENCY?

REF: (A) PANAMA 1346 (B) PANAMA 1309

Classified By: Ambassador William A. Eaton. Reasons: 1.4 (b), (c) and
(d).

Summary

¶1. (C) "President Torrijos and (1st VP and FM) Samuel Lewis informed (National Assembly President) Elias Castillo and (National Assembly President aspirant) Deputy Pedro Miguel Gonzalez on August 14 at the Decameron resort that Torrijos would back Gonzalez to be the next President of the National Assembly," governing Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) legislative majority leader Leandro Avila told POLCOUNS on August 17. (Note: Gonzalez is wanted in the U.S. for the 1991 murder of U.S. serviceman Zak Hernandez and is ineligible for a U.S. visa on terrorism grounds.) Confirming Panama City broadsheet La Estrella's August 16 story that Gonzalez would be the PRD's nominee to be President of the National Assembly, Castillo told POLCOUNS on August 16, "There is no question that Pedro Miguel has the votes," Castillo said. Stating that he had asked Lewis if Gonzalez's election would have a negative impact on U.S.-Panamanian bilateral relations, Castillo asserted that Lewis responded, "The Americans could be handled," and, "It would not be a problem."

¶2. (C) These assertions contrast with separate assurances given to then-Charge by Lewis and Minister of the Presidency Ubalдино Real that Torrijos would "take care" of this problem and that Gonzalez would not be the next President of the Assembly. Both indicated that the Embassy should not be surprised to read press reports indicating that Gonzalez would get the top spot in the Assembly. They explained that Torrijos would ensure that Gonzalez steps down as a candidate but only after he appeared as the virtual winner. Torrijos could not afford to be seen as succumbing to American pressure and needed to give Gonzalez an elegant way out. In consultation with the Department, post has accepted these assurances after having made it clear to both Lewis and Real the consequences of Gonzalez's elevation that would not bode well for the U.S.-Panama Trade Promotion Agreement (TPA) and

our bilateral relations. End summary.

Torrijos and Lewis Greenlight Gonzalez

13. (C) On August 14, President Martin Torrijos and First VP and FM Samuel Lewis called current President of the National Assembly Elias Castillo and Pedro Miguel Gonzalez to a meeting at the Decameron resort in Panama's interior, PRD Majority Leader Leandro Avila explained to POLCOUNS on August 17. At that meeting, Torrijos stated that he would support Gonzalez to be the next President of the National Assembly. Avila indicated that he was irate at the "undemocratic" fashion in which the PRD was making this decision. Avila also explained that Gonzalez was Torrijos' primary liaison with PRD deputies, not the majority leader (Avila) as was normally the case. Furthermore, Avila said he was concerned about negative impact that Gonzalez's election and presidency would have. "How can we have a National Assembly President who is afraid of traveling for fear of being arrested?" Avila asked.

14. (C) Avila laid out the following chain of events. Avila explained that Gonzalez's chances of becoming National Assembly President rose after Castillo failed to secure support to amend the legislature's by-laws to enable Castillo's election for a third term. (Note: Current National Assembly rules permit its president to hold a maximum of two one-year terms.) On Monday, August 13, Avila said that fellow PRD National Assembly Deputy Hector Aleman told him that since Castillo was no longer an option that Aleman's name had been "crossed out" too. Aleman said that would only leave two candidates standing: Deputy Raul Rodriguez and Gonzalez. Avila asserted that Aleman explained that Raul Rodriguez was not "trustworthy," thought he "was above the rest," and had "his own agenda," so therefore Gonzalez would be the better option. According to Avila, on Tuesday, August 14, Torrijos and Lewis, accompanied by Panama Province Governor Gladys Bandiera, met with Castillo and Gonzalez at the Decameron resort. Torrijos indicated he would back Gonzalez, Avila asserted, and it was decided that Gonzalez would host a breakfast on Wednesday, August 15 with all PRD National Assembly Deputies to lobby for his candidacy. On Wednesday, August 15, thirty-two PRD deputies attended Gonzalez's breakfast. (Note: Castillo told POLCOUNS on August 16 that he was the organizer of this meeting and that thirty-five PRD deputies attended.) According to Avila, seven or eight PRD deputies lauded Gonzalez's political experience. "The whole show became almost like a launching of Gonzalez's campaign to become National Assembly President." Panama City broadsheet La Estrella reported in its Thursday, August 16 edition that Gonzalez would be the PRD's nomination for President of the National Assembly.

15. (C) Asked what his reading of this sequence of events was, Avila said, "Torrijos supports Pedro Miguel, but does not want to do it directly. Instead, Torrijos wants to make it look like Gonzalez's candidacy was an initiative of the PRD's National Assembly deputies." Avila also asserted, "If we had done our internal elections democratically and without Torrijos' intervention, it would be a different story, but Torrijos does not let us do that." "I fear that Torrijos believes that he can manage the risk that Gonzalez's election would entail for ratification of the U.S.-Panama Trade Promotion Agreement (TPA)," Avila said.

Castillo: Gonzalez PRD Nat'l Assembly Presidency Nominee

16. (C) On August 16, the same day as La Estrella's story, National Assembly President Elias Castillo granted POLCOUNS a long-standing request for an appointment. "There is no question that Pedro Miguel has the votes," Castillo said. Stating that he had asked Lewis if Gonzalez's election would have a negative impact on U.S.-Panamanian bilateral

relations, Castillo asserted that Lewis responded, "The Americans could be handled," and, "It would not be a problem." Furthermore, Castillo asserted that at the August 15 meeting with PRD deputies, no PRD deputies voiced any concerns about the impact that Gonzalez's election would have on U.S.-Panamanian bilateral relations. During the meeting, Castillo received a call from Lewis and told him that he needed to see Lewis urgently regarding a "personnel matter."

Torrijos to Ask Gonzalez to Step Down

¶7. (C) Minister of the Presidency Ubaldo Real told to Charge on August 17 that Torrijos would ask Gonzalez to step aside. Real explained that Torrijos did not want to be perceived to be seen to be caving in to the "gringos." "Sit tight, and you will see that this matter will soon be resolved," Real told Charge. This conversation followed a telcon between then-Charge and Lewis, in which Lewis regretted that the Embassy meeting with Castillo had complicated Torrijos' task. Lewis asked that Embassy say nothing else and repeated assurances that Torrijos would ask Gonzalez to step down.

U.S. Message

¶8. (C) Post's message to GOP counterparts has been consistent. While underscoring that ultimately it is Panama's sovereign decision who it elects as its National Assembly President, GOP officials should be cognizant of the negative impact that the election of Gonzalez would have on

the bilateral relationship. Gonzalez's problems are of a judicial, not a political, nature. Notions that Gonzalez could reach an "understanding" with the USG once elected President of the National Assembly are foolhardy; if he wants to address this issue, Gonzalez should surrender to U.S. justice. As a practical matter, Panama should consider how the election of somebody the U.S. considers a felon, wanted for the murder of a U.S. serviceman, would play in this post-9/11 era when the U.S. has thousands of troops deployed worldwide in the global war against terrorism. Finally, Gonzalez's election could have a negative impact on efforts to secure U.S. Congressional approval for the TPA.

Comment

¶9. (C) Post is concerned about Torrijos' ability to manage the growing momentum to install Gonzalez as President of the National Assembly. While remaining hopeful that Torrijos will deliver on his assurances that Gonzalez will step down as a candidate, post is also aware that both Torrijos and Lewis need the support of Gonzalez's wing in the PRD. Lewis' diplomatic responsibilities are colliding with his political aspirations. Torrijos has a long-standing relationship with Gonzalez and his family. Gonzalez's father was one of Torrijos' political mentors, and Gonzalez is one of Torrijos' most trusted acolytes in the National Assembly. Avila noted that it was interesting that the PRD had not yet set the date for its National Executive Committee (CEN) meeting to bless the decision to make Gonzalez its nomination for National Assembly President. (Note: The PRD's 45 members dominate the 75 member National Assembly. The PRD's nomination will be the chamber's next President.) That meeting will need to happen some time between now and September 1 when the next session of the National Assembly is inaugurated. Castillo, whose efforts to clear the way for his own re-election to a third consecutive term were stymied by Gonzalez, is spoiling for a fight with Gonzalez. Aleman, who is out of favor with Torrijos, is most likely looking for ways to elbow his way to the head of the race for National Assembly President by pushing Gonzalez out of the way. Real's message that Torrijos would soon ask Gonzalez to step aside is welcome

news, but post remain vigilant as the matter continues to evolve.

¶10. (C) While Post has accepted Torrijos' assurances, post will examine possible ways to respond should Gonzalez indeed be elected, possibly for starters to include boycotting the September 1 opening of the National Assembly and issuing a press statement that lays out the reason for such an action. Given the Torrijos Administration's confidence that its close relationships with Washington (including with POTUS and the Secretary) provide it ample maneuver space in the bilateral relationship, post believes that it is important for both post and Washington to hit the GOP hard together so that neither Torrijos nor Lewis can perceive any daylight between the Embassy and Washington.

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